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THE OMEN OF SNEEZING

BY ARTHUR STANLEY PEASE

Of the numerous folk-customs and beliefs traceable from ancient to modern times few are more persistent or more widely diffused than those connected with sneezing. Among several short discussions¹ of the ominous significance of this act, there is, so far as I am aware, none that is based upon any very extensive collection of the instances in Greek and Roman literature. In this article I shall attempt to classify such data as I have been able to collect and to offer some suggestions as to their interpretation, frankly admitting at the outset that, in such a question as this, which extends through the folk-lore of many nations, it is well-nigh impossible to frame any certain theory of the ultimate origin of the beliefs under discussion, yet hoping that the explanations to be here offered may cast some light upon the attitude of the Greeks and Romans toward these rather interesting customs.

The belief that sneezing possesses an ominous significance appears very early in literature. In the *Odyssey*,² Penelope, at the end of a speech to Eumaeus, declares:

“εἰ δ’ Ὀδυσσεὺς ἔλθοι καὶ ἵκοιτ’ ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν,
αἰψά κε σὺν ᾧ παιδὶ βίας ἀποτίσεται ἀνδρῶν.”
ὥς φάτο. Τηλέμαχος δὲ μέγ’ ἔπτарεν, ἀμφὶ δὲ δῶμα
σμερδαλέον κονάβησε γέλασσε δὲ Πηνελόπεια,
αἰψά δ’ ἄρ’ Εὐμαιον ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα·
“ἔρχεό μοι, τὸν ξεῖνον ἐναντίον ᾧδε κάλεσσον.
οὐχ ὄρας, ὃ μοι υἱὸς ἐπέπτаре πᾶσιν ἔπεσσιν;
τῷ κε καὶ οὐκ ἀτελὴς θάνατος μνηστῆρσι γένοιτο
πᾶσι μάλ’, οὐδὲ κέ τις θάνατον καὶ κῆρας ἀλίξοι.”

Among the Greeks of the classical period and even long after the spread of Christianity this belief in ominous sneezes remained in force. Protests against it by Greeks are comparatively few. The

¹ Especially Bouché-Leclercq *Histoire de la divination dans l'antiquité* I, 160 ff., and Baehrens on Catullus 45. 8-9. M. Schookins *De Sternutatione* (Amsterdam, 1664) has not been accessible to me.

² xvii. 539 ff.

Roman writer Frontinus¹ tells us that Timotheus, the Athenian commander against Corcyra in 373, when he found that his pilot, alarmed by a sneeze of one of his rowers, had sounded a retreat, exclaimed, *miraris . . . ex tot milibus unum perfrixisse?* A fragment of the comic poet Philemon² says:

ὅταν δὲ παρατηροῦντ' ἴδω τίς ἔπτарεν
ἢ τίς ἐλάλησεν, ἢ τίς ἐστὶν ὁ προΐων
σκοποῦντα, πωλῶ τοῦτον εὐθὺς ἐν ἀγορᾷ.³
αὐτῷ βαδίζει καὶ λαλεῖ καὶ πτάρνυται
ἕκαστος ἡμῶν, οὐχὶ τοῖς ἐν τῇ πόλει.
τὰ πράγμαθ' ὥς πέφυκεν οὕτω γίγνεται.

And Plutarch, in his treatise *De Genio Socratis*,⁴ after one of his speakers has related a theory (to which I shall later recur) that the *δαιμόνιον* of Socrates was only a sneeze, represents that speaker as feeling wonder that Socrates should have confused a divine spirit and sneezing, or that so reasonable and truth-seeking a man should have allowed his conduct to be influenced by anything so fortuitous.⁵ But the general attitude of the Greeks was apparently more credulous, and even Aristotle, with the utmost gravity, describes and tries to explain the omen of sneezing. The hold which the custom had among the Romans is somewhat hard to estimate. Catullus,⁶ Propertius,⁷ and Ovid,⁸ in passages in lighter vein and perhaps in imitation of Greek models,⁹ refer to it but not in a way that necessarily implies belief upon their own part. That Pliny the Elder in several places¹⁰ catalogues sneezing among omens, of which he is an assiduous collector, indicates comparatively little for the belief of the educated, except in one passage,¹¹ where, by the use of the first person plural, he includes himself or his social class in the number of those who salute one who sneezes. But Cicero in his treatise *De Divinatione*¹² shows clearly that belief in sneezing as an omen was not only something which he and his friends¹³ did not hold, but also a thing which it

¹ *Strateg.* i. 12. 11.

² 100 Kock.

³ I.e., "I think him the equal of a mere slave."

⁴ 581B.

⁵ For conflicting views as to the seriousness of sneezes cf. Plut. *op. cit.* 582B, 589F.

⁶ 45. 8-9, 17-18.

⁷ ii. 3. 24.

⁸ *Heroides* 18. 151.

⁹ Cf. Theocr. 7. 96 and perhaps 18. 16.

¹⁰ ii. 24; vii. 42; xxviii. 23, 26.

¹¹ xxviii. 23.

¹² ii. 84.

¹³ Except the Stoic ones (?).

would be preposterous to expect them to adopt. For the attitude of the common people, on the other hand, we have the testimony of Petronius¹ and Apuleius,² as well as the cases collected by Pliny, and we may assume that the real belief in sneezing as an actual omen lived and thrived, at any rate among the less sophisticated, all through the classical period. In the postclassical period it is also evident, and, not unnaturally, becomes the object of ecclesiastical censure. Thus St. Basil³ mentions sneezing along with attention to ominous words, stumbling, etc. A sermon attributed to St. Ambrose⁴ predicts the damnation of those who believe in phylacteries, written charms, sneezings, the song of birds, divinations, astrologers, or any other evil arts whatever. St. Augustine censures a form of the belief in sneezing.⁵ Much later, in 743, at a church council at Les-tines in Belgium, the practice was condemned.⁶ A passage of doubtful authenticity in a letter of Alcuin⁷ advises his correspondent, an unknown bishop, to protect his flock from auguries, the songs of birds, sneezings, and many things of that sort. But superstition here, as on many other occasions, maintained itself against ecclesiastical censure and the ridicule of reason, and beliefs in the prophetic or ominous value of sneezing are at the present time widely diffused and very varied. I shall here, however, touch upon such only of these present-day beliefs as seem to have some bearing upon the explanation of Greek and Roman practice.

An analysis of the material at hand appears to show that the significance and interpretation of sneezing depended chiefly upon one or more of the following factors: the position of the sneezer, especially with reference to the person who receives the sneezing as an omen; the time of the sneeze; and, in certain cases, the physical condition of the sneezer.

The value attached to the position of the sneezer at the moment of the act, on which little stress is laid in modern practice, is without doubt due to the significance attributed by the ancients to left and

¹ 98. 4-5.

² *Metam.* ix. 25.

³ *ad Is.* 12, quoted by Moser on *Cic. De Div.* ii. 84.

⁴ Appendix, *Sermo* 24. 6 (*Migne Patrol. Lat.* XVII, 653).

⁵ *De Doctr. Christ.* ii. 20.

⁶ Smith *Dict. Christ. Antiqq.* 1545b.

⁷ *Ep.* 179 (*Migne Patrol. Lat.* C, 450).

right in the observation of many other kinds of omens, such as thunderbolts, flights of birds, etc. The particular force of right and left varied with the omen itself, with the nationality of the observer, and according as he employed the popular or the official augural prescriptions.¹ In the greater number of cases of ominous sneezing known to us the position is not indicated, and we may believe that it was often disregarded. The difficulty of applying this principle when a person sneezed in the midst of a crowd surrounding him on all sides has been remarked by Bouché-Leclercq,² who also shows³ that position in space can have no meaning when the sneeze is to be considered an omen for the sneezer himself. In certain cases, however, where some omen was especially looked for and where the direction allowed of no ambiguity, attention was paid to the quarter from which the sneeze came. Cases of sneezing on the right appear, in Greek usage at least, to have been lucky,⁴ and to this direction Plutarch⁵ adds as favorable signs sneezes from in front or from behind, while his disputant represents Socrates as considering sneezes from the left as unfavorable or deterrent.⁶ The most famous passage bearing upon this question is found in Catullus,⁷ and upon the famous *crux* there presented many scholars have come to grief. I must regretfully admit that for the textual and exegetical difficulties of the passage I have found no satisfactory solution, but one or two inferences which may be safely drawn from the text in its present uncertain state I shall later notice. With this notion of position, though by a rather different principle, may be classified a curious poem in the *Palatine Anthology*:⁸

Ἐπταρον ἄγχι τάφοιο, καὶ ἤθελον αὐτόθ' ἀκοῦσαι
οἷάπερ αἰσάμην, μοῖραν ἐμῆς ἀλόχου.
ἔπταρον εἰς ἀνέμους· ἄλοχον δέ μοι οὐ τι κηχάνει
λυγρὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποις, οὐ νόσος, οὐ θάνατος.⁹

¹ For a very brief summary of some of these customs see A. P. Wagener *Popular Associations of Right and Left in Roman Literature* (Notes from the Classical Seminars, Johns Hopkins University [1910], 31-34).

² *Op. cit.* i. 162.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Plut. *De Gen. Socr.* 581B; *Themist.* 119A.

⁵ *De Gen. Socr.*, loc. cit. ⁶ Cf. Diog. Laert. vi. 48. ⁷ 45. 8-9, 17-18. ⁸ xi. 375.

⁹ In the island of Cos, at the present day, sneezing in the presence of a dead body portends the death of the sneezer and the freedom of the corpse from decay. W. R. Paton in *Folk-Lore* XVIII (1907), 331.

The temporal significance of sneezing appears especially at the beginnings of enterprises, as is clearly shown by Aristotle,¹ who says:

Διὰ τί οἱ μὲν ἀπὸ μέσων νυκτῶν ἄχρι μέσης ἡμέρας οὐκ ἀγαθοὶ παρμoί, οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ μέσης ἡμέρας ἄχρι μέσων νυκτῶν; ἢ ὅτι ὁ μὲν παρμoς μᾶλλον δοκεῖ ἐπισχεῖν τοὺς ἀρχομένους καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ; διὸ ὅταν μέλλωσιν ἀρχομένοις συμβῆναι, μάλιστα ἀποτρεπέμεθα τοῦ πράττειν. ἡ μὲν οὖν ἡὼς καὶ τὸ ἀπὸ μέσων νυκτῶν οἶον ἀρχή τις· διὸ εὐλαβούμεθα πταρεῖν, μὴ κωλύσωμεν ὥρμημένον. πρὸς δειλῆς δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ μέσας νύκτας οἶον τελευτή τις καὶ ἐναντίον ἐκείνῳ ὥστε ἐν τῷ ἐναντίῳ ταῦτόν αἰρετέον.

Several other passages in ancient authors attest this connection of sneezing and beginnings, a notion exactly paralleled by the extreme regard paid both in ancient and modern superstition to other kinds of omens observed at the commencement of any undertaking, particularly a journey.² Thus the sneeze identified by the speaker in Plutarch³ with the *δαιμόνιον* of Socrates is said to have confirmed him when hesitating (a positive character not usually assigned to this enigmatical spirit) or to have dissuaded and prevented him if he had begun. Among favorable omens immediately preceding the battle of Salamis and during the preparations for it Plutarch⁴ mentions a sneeze on the right; to the unfavorable interpretation of a sneeze just at starting in the case of the fleet commanded by Timotheus⁵ I have already referred. The famous Catullus passage⁶ draws a favorable omen from a sneeze occurring at the commencement, or, as some infer, at the renewal of the love of Septimius and Acme. St. Augustine⁷ mentions the custom of returning to bed if one sneezes while putting on his shoes. So at the present day in Persia a single sneeze at the beginning of a journey is considered a bad omen.⁸ The same ominous relation between sneezings and

¹ *Probl.* 33. 11.

² *Cumque in omnibus rebus vim habent maxumam prima et extrema.* Cic. *N.D.* ii. 67. For the connection of sneezing with other parts of journeys than the beginning see G. Taylor on the folk-lore of aboriginal Formosa in *Folk-Lore Journal* V (1887), 149.

³ *De Gen. Socr., loc. cit.*

⁴ *Themist.* 119A.

⁵ *Frontinus loc. cit.*

⁶ 45. 8-9, 17-18.

⁷ *De Doctr. Christ.* ii. 20.

⁸ "Persians in such a case will stare hard at the sun in order to induce a second or third sneeze. If they are unsuccessful in doing this they can betake themselves to repeating a certain invocation to Allah; but most Persians will give up the expedition. My brother's Persian secretary always attributed a bad accident to the fact that someone had sneezed just as he was mounting his horse." Ella C. Sykes in *Folk-Lore* XII (1901), 266-67. It may here be remarked that the method of producing

beginnings is found in various German folk-beliefs, as, for instance, that according to which if one of the couple at a wedding sneezes during the ceremony the match will be unlucky,¹ or that which asserts that a child who sneezes before baptism will be clever.² Various modern customs connect favorable or unfavorable sneezings with the different days of the week³ or hours of the day.⁴ To the age, sex, or personality of the sneezer, upon which modern folk-lore lays some emphasis (references to the sneezes of children being especially frequent⁵), I find no clear allusion in ancient customs.⁶

To a somewhat different category belong cases of sneezing in illness. Here the belief in the ominous meaning of the sneeze is modified by its symptomatic tendency. Moreover while ominous sneezing in other cases usually points toward the future of someone else than the sneezer, that of a sick person is invariably indicative of the fortune of that person alone. Aristotle in his *Problemata*

a sneeze by gazing at the sun, due to the strong stimulation of the optic nerve, is recognized by Aristotle, who says: ἀνακύπτομεν πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον, ὅταν βουλόμεθα πταρεῖν.—*Probl.* 33. 15. It would be interesting if we could know whether this voluntary sneezing, for which it is a little difficult to find a reason, may not be due, in Aristotle's case as in the Persian example, to the desire to produce an omen ready to order for some particular occasion.

¹ A. Wüttke *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube der Gegenwart*, 3d ed. by E. H. Meyer, 304.

² *Ibid.* 316.

³ *Ibid.* 287; P. Drechsler *Sitte, Brauch und Volksglaube in Schlesien* II, 195; W. H. Babcock in folk-lore notes collected near Washington, D.C., in *Folk-Lore Journal* VI (1888), 92.

⁴ Article "New England Superstitions" in *Folk-Lore Journal* II (1884), 24. Compare also Aristotle's description cited above (p. 433).

⁵ E.g., Wüttke *op. cit.* 287; R. Wossidlo *Mecklenburgische Volksüberlieferungen* 366; J. Sibree, Jr., in *Folk-Lore Record* II (1879), 36, for a custom in Madagascar; B. C. A. Windle in *Folk-Lore* XVII (1906), 250, for a Basuto custom, in which the child at birth is held in the smoke of a slow fire till it sneezes to show that it is not bewitched; cf. the sneeze of a new-born child received as an omen that it will live, noted by G. H. Kinahan in his remarks upon Connemara folk-lore in *Folk-Lore Journal* II (1884), 257. Does Propertius ii. 3. 24 perhaps belong here? For the sneezes of women see *Folk-Lore* XV (1904), 210 (a custom among the negroes of Jamaica). There may also be cited here the cases of unlucky sneezes noted by Pliny, *N.H.* vii. 42, and repeated by Gellius, iii. 16. 24.

⁶ The reference in Photius to the sneeze of a woman (cited by Hübner and Jacobitz on Diog. Laert. vi. 48) is probably not intended to emphasize the sex of the sneezer. Nor is importance to be attributed to the age of the tyrant Hippias at the battle of Marathon where he sneezed out one of his teeth and was unable to find it in the sand, though Herodotus (vi. 107) assigns his age as the reason for his sneezing so hard, a cause discussed by Aristotle (*Probl.* 33. 12) and Pliny (*N.H.* xxviii. 57), who inquire why old men have such labor in sneezing.

gives much physiological information in regard to sneezing, and among other things the statement¹ that while coughing and catarrh are naturally found in the sick, sneezing is not. Elsewhere² he adds:

ὅταν γὰρ κρατήσῃ ἡ ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ θερμότης τὴν ὑγρότητα, τὸ πνεῦμα τότε γίνεται παρμὸς· διὸ καὶ τοὺς ἐκθνήσκοντας κινῶσι παρμικῶ,³ ὡς ἐὰν μὴ τοῦτ' ἔδύνωνται πάσχαν, ἀσώτους ὄντας· ὥστε ὡς σημείον ὑγείας τοῦ ἀρρώστου καὶ ἱερωτάτου τόπου προσκυνοῦσιν ὡς ἱερόν, καὶ φήμην ἀγαθὴν ποιοῦνται.

Similarly Celsus,⁴ speaking of fevers, says: *Sternumentum etiam inter bona indicia est et cupiditas cibi vel a primo servata vel etiam post fastidium orta.*⁵ Of course there were exceptions, and Celsus in another passage⁶ remarks that in lung diseases coughing and catarrh are dangerous, as is also sneezing, which, in other diseases, is considered a healthful symptom.⁷ In Iceland the custom of saluting a sneezer is said to have arisen during the Black Pest, of which, in its victims, a violent sneezing was a premonition, and for which the pious wish "God help you," or "God help me," as the case might be, was devised as a remedy.⁸ With this may be compared a similar belief among the Germans in Hungary,⁹ and one cannot but recall the description given by Thucydides¹⁰ of the plague at Athens, in which sneezing was one of the earlier symptoms, although this disease appears somewhat different from any now known and is probably not to be identified¹¹ with the plague of later times. The use of pious

¹ 33. 7.

² 33. 9.

³ For various herbs and other remedies used to produce sneezing see Pliny *N.H.* xxv. 52, 56, 135, 173; xxviii. 88; xxxii. 28, and for the clearing effect upon the head Pliny *N.H.* xx. 137; xxi. 142, and elsewhere.

⁴ ii. 3.

⁵ So in Jerusalem at the present day the sneeze of a sick person is regarded as a favorable symptom. (Mrs. H. H. Spoer in *Folk-Lore* XVIII [1907], 72.) In the case of Elisha and the Shunammite's son (II Kings 4:35) seven sneezes by the child are the sign of his restoration to life. For the method of cure there applied we may perhaps compare Tambornino *De antiquorum daemonismo* 81 *fin.*

⁶ ii. 8.

⁷ For sneezing at coition see p. 434, n. 5, above. Sneezes are also treated as a bad symptom by Gallaeus ad Lact. ii. 15 (Migne *Patrol. Lat.* VI, 332 n.): *Rabbini volunt plures in sternutatione obuisse mortem, atque hinc natum ut sternutantem salvare (sic) iuebant.*

⁸ Powell and Magnússon *Icelandic Legends*, 2d series, 646.

⁹ Described by W. H. Jones and L. L. Kropf in *Folk-Lore Journal* I (1883), 357.

¹⁰ ii. 49.

¹¹ See the review of the question in Busolt *Gr. Gesch.* III, 943 (following Ebstein *Die Pest des Thukydides*).

formulas of address to a sneezing person is one of the most familiar phenomena of folk-lore, though its ancient origin is not, perhaps, very generally appreciated or made allowance for by the Icelandic and Hungarian beliefs already mentioned. The Greek phrase is Ζεῦ σῶσον, and is found in a curious epigram in the *Palatine Anthology*.¹

Οὐ δύναται τῇ χειρὶ Πρόκλος τὴν ῥῖν' ἀπομύσσειν·
τῆς ῥινὸς γὰρ ἔχει τὴν χέρα μικροτέρην·
οὐδὲ λέγει Ζεῦ σῶσον ἐὰν παρῇ· οὐ γὰρ ἀκούει
τῆς ῥινός· πολὺ γὰρ τῆς ἀκοῆς ἀπέχει.

In Latin Petronius² seems to point to *salve* as the word used, and Apuleius³ appears to use a periphrasis for the same word.⁴ In modern times the custom is widely diffused, though often with little of its original meaning. In Greece 'γεία σου,'⁵ in Italy "Felicità"⁶ is said; among German-speaking peoples "Gott hilf dir," "Gesundheit," "Prosit," or an equivalent;⁷ in France "Bonne Santé";⁸ in Ireland "God bless you";⁹ and corresponding phrases in Iceland,¹⁰ Cairo,¹¹ and Madagascar.¹² In India a wish for one's long life is uttered;¹³ among Hebrews some pious wish;¹⁴ among the negroes of South Carolina, "Bless 'em";¹⁵ among those of Tennessee, "Scat."¹⁶

¹ xi. 268.

² 98. 4-5: *Eumolpus conversus salvere Gilonā iubet.*

³ *Metam.* ix. 25; *salutem ei fuerat imprecatus.*

⁴ Cf. Pliny *N.H.* xxviii. 23.

⁵ Lawson *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* 330. He states that there is sometimes added the facetious variant: *Ψοφήση ἡ πεθερά σου*, "may your mother-in-law die like a dog."

⁶ Wordsworth on Theocritus 7. 96.

⁷ Wuttke *op. cit.* 768; Drechsler *op. cit.* II, 23; Wossidlo *op. cit.* 366; Schönewerth *Aus der Oberpfalz. Sitten und Sagen* III, 245-46; W. H. Jones and L. L. Kropf in *Folk-Lore Journal* I (1883), 357; Mather and Hewitt on Xen. *Anab.* iii. 29 (p. 347).

⁸ Mather and Hewitt *loc. cit.*

⁹ B. J. Jones in *Folk-Lore* XV (1904), 339; G. H. Kinahan in *Folk-Lore Record* IV (1881), 105.

¹⁰ Powell and Magnússon *op. cit.* 646.

¹¹ Sayce in *Folk-Lore* XVII (1906), 198.

¹² J. Sibree, Jr., in *Folk-Lore Record* II (1879), 36.

¹³ *Kullavagga* v. 33. 3 (in *Sacred Books of the East* XX, 152-53).

¹⁴ Gallaeus on Lact. ii. 15 (in *Migne Patrol. Lat.* VI, 332n.).

¹⁵ So I am informed by Dr. H. S. V. Jones.

¹⁶ Professor G. R. Throop has communicated this item to me. It is doubtless said in order to drive away the evil influence thought to be at work in the sneezer.

In the island of Cos "people on hearing a sneeze utter some prayer or ejaculation in which the title of *περίδρομος* ('run-about') is given to the Deity."¹ German ghosts, according to Wüttke,² often sneeze purposely in order that the pious prayer "Gott hilf dir" may assist to set them free from torment.

To describe and classify the recorded cases of sneezing as an omen, is, of course, far easier than to suggest any general principles by which they are to be explained. I should like, however, to call attention to a point which has appeared but little in the passages thus far quoted, but which may contain a possible clue to the solution of many of the instances before us. In his *Historia Animalium*,³ Aristotle, speaking of the nose, says:

καὶ ὁ παρμὸς διὰ ταύτης γίνεται, πνεύματος ἀθρόου ἔξοδος, σημεῖον οἰωνο-
στικὸν καὶ ἱερὸν μόνον τῶν πνευμάτων.

Elsewhere⁴ he asks:

διὰ τί τὸν μὲν παρμὸν θεὸν ἡγοῦμεθα εἶναι, τὴν δὲ βῆχα ἢ τὴν κόρυζαν
οὐ; ἢ διότι ἐκ τοῦ θειοτάτου τῶν περὶ ἡμᾶς τῆς κεφαλῆς, ὅθεν ὁ λογισμὸς
ἐστὶ, γίνεται;⁵

The familiar account given by Xenophon in the *Anabasis*⁶ shows how general was the belief in the sacred character of the omen. While Xenophon was addressing the army urging a retreat someone sneezed.

ἀκούσαντες δ' οἱ στρατιῶται πάντες μὲν ὁρμῇ προσεκίνησαν τὸν θεόν, καὶ
ὁ Ξενοφῶν εἶπε· "Δοκεῖ μοι, ὦ ἄνδρες, ἐπεὶ περὶ σωτηρίας ἡμῶν λεγόντων
οἰωνὸς τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ σωτήρος ἐφάνη, εὐξασθαι τῷ θεῷ τοῦτ' ἵνα θύσειν σωτήρια
ὅπου ἂν πρῶτον εἰς φιλίαν χώραν ἀφικώμεθα, κτλ."⁷

With this view of the sacredness of the omen Athenaeus also agrees.⁸ That the deity which communicated its future designs to mortals through so great a variety of mediums as were recognized by the ancients should have spoken in this particular form also need occasion

¹ W. H. D. Rouse in *Folk-Lore* XI (1899), 181.

² *Op. cit.* 768. To the work of Morin: *Sur les souhaits en faveur de ceux qui éternuent* (1712), I have not had access.

³ i. 11 (p. 492b, 5 ff.).

⁴ *Probl.* 33. 7.

⁵ Cf. *Probl.* 33. 9: ἔστι δὲ φύσα μὲν ἀπὸ τῆς κάτω κοιλίας πνεῦμα, ἐρυγμὸς δὲ τῆς ἄνω, ὁ δὲ παρμὸς τῆς κεφαλῆς. διὰ τὸ ἱερώτατον οὖν εἶναι τὸν τόπον καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐντεῦθεν ὡς ἱερὸν προσκυνοῦσιν.

⁶ iii. 2. 9.

⁷ Cf. Plut. *Themist.* 119A.

⁸ ii. 66c.

us little surprise, and the learned explanations of Aristotle were perhaps sufficient for the curious of his day. I think it possible, however, that a somewhat different explanation may lead us nearer the real truth. The passage in Plutarch's *De Genio Socratis*¹ is of no value to us for determining the nature of the *δαιμόνιον* of Socrates, and in assigning to that spirit the rôle of a positive as well as a negative mentor the author seems to misunderstand the character of its advice. Yet as showing what others had lighted upon as an explanation of the *δαιμόνιον* Plutarch's passage is suggestive. In it one of the speakers narrates the view of Terpsion of Megara that the peculiar spirit of Socrates was nothing but a sneeze, either his own or that of another person favorable or unfavorable according to its position, as I have already stated. Now granting that Socrates' demon was not a sneeze, yet does not the passage seem to indicate, from precisely the reverse point of view, that sneezing was recognized as having some connection with—perhaps being the utterance of—a demon? Otherwise the connection between the two things—demon and sneeze—is obscure, but if this view be correct, Terpsion, while trying to explain the demon of Socrates, selected a more or less generally recognized form of demonic manifestation and forthwith identified with it the unique inner voice of the Athenian philosopher. That a demon within the person might, according to certain beliefs, receive outside influences through the nose is shown by Aristotle,² who says:

ἐν τῷ Νεῖλῳ ποταμῷ γενᾶσθαι λίθον φασὶ κνᾶμψ παρόμοιον,³ ὃν ἂν κύνες ἴδωσιν, οὐχ ἑλακτοῦσι. συντελεῖ δὲ καὶ τοῖς δαίμονι τιμι γενομένους κατοχούς· ἅμα γὰρ τῷ προστεθῆναι ταῖς ῥίσιν ἀπέρχεται τὸ δαιμόνιον.⁴

That the nostrils are among the usual ways of ingress or egress of demons is perhaps more than we are justified in assuming,⁵ though as the principal entrances of breath into the interior of the body they might sometimes be appropriately so considered, and Bouché-Leclercq⁶ states that the Zulus explain sneezing as the entry through

¹ 581B.

² *De Mirab. Auscult.* 166.

³ Probably some kind of fossil.

⁴ Many other references to similar customs, especially that of smoking out the demon by burning brimstone and such substances before the nostrils of the possessed person, may be found in Tambornino *De antiquorum daemonismo* 83.

⁵ The mouth is the more normal route.

⁶ *Op. cit.* i. 163.

the nostrils of a spirit on its way to the breast, this being ordinarily the spirit of an ancestor and a good counselor; but that as the nose is the medium through which influences may reach the demon within so it may also be the route by which the utterance of the demon may on occasion be sent forth seems not to be a harsh assumption, and this view would explain more adequately the sacredness of such an utterance than will Aristotle's connection of sneezing with the mere sanctity of the head. Moreover possession by a demon is constantly used by the ancients as an explanation not only of insanity (which is naturally often associated with and localized in the head¹) but also of the kindred prophetic frenzy of the *vates* or seer.² That its significance might be realized by others or even by the possessed person himself would naturally demand either some duration in time, so that the possessed might gain a reputation for abnormality and his words or actions be consequently regarded as of especial meaning, or else the voluntary and evident seeking of the state of mania by means of some acknowledged method, such as intoxication or orgiastic rites. Neither of these courses would be readily available in the case of a demon who was to make one immediate and isolated prophetic declaration (such as, for example, that at the speech of Xenophon referred to above). What then could be more natural than that, where a single articulate speech of the possessed might pass unnoticed from his not having acquired the character and reputation of a *vates*, the demon should resort to the immediate, conspicuous,³ and somewhat uncanny device of a sneeze?

Thus far I have discussed the phenomena of ominous sneezing and have suggested a theory which may be adequate to explain many of them. It remains that I should consider the interpretation of these signs. Omens, upon analysis, may be seen to be of two sorts, the one pointing backward and corroborative of what has taken place, the other pointing forward and prophetic of the future. The

¹ Cf. Plato *Tim.* 90A for the demon's dwelling in the head.

² For examples of such *ἐνθουσιασμός* or possession by the god see Rohde *Psyche* II, 18 ff.

³ In this respect sneezing is rather exceptional among the movements of the waking body, which are usually, as Aristotle says (*De Div. per Somn.* 1, p. 463a, 7 ff.), less conspicuous than those in sleep. Sneezing never occurs during sleep, according to Aristotle, *Probl.* 33. 15.

former follows, the latter precedes some action or word of especial significance. Furthermore, in order that the act to which the omen refers may be better discerned and appreciated among an infinite number of other acts, the space of time elapsing between act and omen or omen and act tends to be reduced to a minimum, and this is particularly the case with corroborative omens. It very often happens that the corroborative omen, whether thunder or bird or sneeze, follows immediately upon its corresponding act or word, and if that act or word be not a complete whole in itself but a part of a larger and as yet incomplete series of acts, then the omen which is corroborative of the correctness of the single act may become prophetic of the success of the entire policy, and in this way the apparent gulf between omens pointing backward and those pointing forward is easily bridged. Sneezing, like other omens, is found in both of these forms, and in several passages it may be explained as being either one of them. In the *Anabasis* passage¹ the sneeze occurs while Xenophon is speaking, in such a way as to point, as he and the army interpret it, to his words just uttered. But it is also treated by him as an omen of the success of the policy he had been urging upon the soldiers. Again, in the Catullus passage,² the sneeze of Love follows immediately after and approves the speeches of Septimius and Acme, but it is also, as Catullus makes clear, a good omen for the continuance of their love, of which these speeches are but a part. The idea of corroborative favorable sneezing is most exactly expressed in Greek by the compound ἐπιπταίρω.³ In German the corresponding word is *beniesen*, and all through Germany the belief is found that if one sneeze while another is speaking the sneeze is a confirmation of what has been said.⁴ This idea may be carried a step farther, and the sneeze be regarded as the confirmation of an unuttered wish. "Persians believe," says Ella C. Sykes,⁵ ". . . that if they are desiring anything ardently and someone sneezes at that moment

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² *Loc. cit.*

³ Cf. Basil on Is. 12; Theocr. 7. 96; 18. 16; also a parody of the idea in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* 294 ff. The custom, though not with this particular word, is found in modern Greece, where, if a sneeze be heard as one is speaking, those who are present say ἀλήθεια λές (or λέει). Lawson *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* 330.

⁴ Wüttke *op. cit.* 309; cf. Drechsler *op. cit.* II, 23.

⁵ *Folk-Lore* XII (1901), 266-67.

their wish is sure to be granted. My brother's Persian secretary . . . assured me that he owed the schooling he had had in England to the fact that when, as quite a child, he was wishing to go to that country, someone had sneezed." The same notion is to be seen in the epigram from the *Palatine Anthology*¹ already cited, where the wish of the husband to hear of the death of his wife is connected with his sneezing near a tomb and into the wind, though whether the wish is antecedent or consequent to the sneeze is not absolutely clear. It may perhaps be that the idea of corroborative sneezing will explain the view of Aristotle² already cited that sneezes between midday and midnight are lucky, because that part of the day is associated with the end rather than the beginning, and, consequently, a sneeze at that time marks approval of what has been done.³

When we turn to omens that point forward we find an even greater interest on the part of the observer, a greater uncertainty as to the meaning of the omen, and, quite naturally, more apprehension of evil and tendency to interpret the omen in an unfavorable sense. Like all other forms of divination these omens of sneezing were largely determined in their meaning by the mental attitude of the observer. Quick-wittedness and cleverness on the part of an interpreter could often turn an ambiguous omen into one clearly good or clearly bad.⁴ To determine to what person's words or actions the chance sneezes of a third person might refer would at times demand a large degree of penetration, but this difficulty is not one peculiar to the omen of sneezing.

Carelessness or undue haste or neglect in observing an omen sometimes led to a special significance in its repetition. Petronius⁵ refers to sneezing thrice in succession; Apuleius⁶ to a sneeze repeated again and again till it excited alarm.⁷ In Germany at the present time ghosts are said often to sneeze thrice.⁸ In Persia, by a principle

¹ XI, 375.

² *Probl.* 33. 11.

³ Here should perhaps be classed the belief found in South Germany (according to Wüttke *op. cit.* 287) that if the youngest child in the house sneezes in bed on Saturday night a lucky week will follow. In this case the prediction would be a consequence inferred from the confirmation of the week just ended.

⁴ Pliny *N.H.* xxviii. 16. ⁵ 98. 4-5. ⁶ *Metam.* ix. 25. ⁷ Cf. also Photius *loc. cit.*

⁸ Wüttke *op. cit.* 768; cf. also Drechsler *op. cit.* II, 268; Goodrich-Freer in *Folk-Lore* XIII (1902), 50.

I have not elsewhere noted, repetitions of sneezes negative the bad omen of a single sneeze.¹

Through many of these omens of the future we find recurring an undefined dread, for there is always the chance that by the misinterpretation of the observer that may be considered as favorable which is in reality the portent of disaster. Of such misinterpretations Greek and Roman literature furnish many examples, and they could hardly have failed to awaken fear. Menander voices this apprehension when he says:²

λυπούμεθ', ἂν πτάρη τις, ἂν εἴπῃ κακῶς
ὀργιζόμεθ', ἂν ἴδῃ τις ἐνύπνιον σφόδρα
φοβούμεθ', ἂν γλαυξ ἀνακράγῃ δεδοίκαμεν.

Hence, he says, the brutes are far better off than men, for they are free from omens.³

The power of analogy in folk-customs is very great, and those cases in which we have seen a considerable extension of the principles of beginnings and of right and left may suggest the possibility that various other modern sneezing customs may be derived by equally natural extensions and admixtures, from the same origins,

¹ E. C. Sykes in *Folk-Lore* XII (1901), 266-67. In Japan, as I am informed by Mr. S. Sekine, one sneeze denotes that someone is praising, two that someone is blaming, and three that someone is loving the sneezer, while four are an indication of a cold in the head! The seven sneezes by the Shunammite's son I have already noted (II Kings 4:35). Aristotle (*Probl.* 33. 3) thinks we normally sneeze twice, rather than once or more than twice.

The term sneezing may also be applied metaphorically to other things than persons, still retaining its ominous force. In the *Palatine Anthology* (VI, 333) is an epigram by one Marcus Argentarius addressed to a lamp and running as follows:

"Ἡδῇ, φίλτατε λύχνε, τρίς ἔπταρες ἢ τάχα τερπνὴν
εἰς θαλάμους ἤξειν Ἀντιγόνην προλήγεις;
εἰ γάρ, ἄναξ, εἴῃ τόδ' ἐτήτυμον, οἷός ἑ Ἀπόλλων
θνητοῖς μάντις ἔσῃ καὶ σὺ παρὰ τρίποδι.

With this passage, naturally not to be taken too seriously, may be compared one in Ovid (*Heroides* 18. 151), where Hero writes to Leander:

*Sternuit et lumen (posito nam scribimus illo),
sternuit et nobis prospera signa dedit.*

For this notion of the ominous sputtering of lamps in Greece today see Lawson *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion* 328. The ominous principle in the case of lamps is doubtless different from that of sneezing but has been by analogy and metaphor confused with it.

² Frag. 534, 9 ff. Kock.

³ A hymn in the Atharva-veda (x. 3. 6, in *Sacred Books of the East* XLII, 82) declares that a certain amulet will afford protection to its possessor in case of his beholding an evil dream, seeing an inauspicious animal, or hearing an ominous sneeze or the evil shriek of a bird—a kind of insurance against omens not without parallels among the Greeks and Romans.

to which, in their final forms, their relation appears obscure. We must be on our guard, however, against overlooking the possible influence of the other, symptomatic explanation of sneezing in illness, which may equally well have been extended by analogy. The theory of demonic obsession in illness might be adduced to apply even to these cases and so reduce them to the same fundamental principle as the cases of ominous sneezing, but we shall probably be on safer ground if we are content to suppose that in the eyes of the Greek and Roman medical systems these sneezings of the sick possessed at bottom physiological causes, such as those which Aristotle, in various purely physiological passages which I have not here cited,¹ labors to set forth, or, in the unfavorable cases, such as those which the folk-lore of Hungary and Iceland assigns.² From this physiological conception is to be derived, as I have already indicated, the use of prophylactic phrases like *salve*.³

In this brief sketch I have attempted to show that belief in the significance of sneezing is a very ancient superstition, appearing in a well-developed form as early as Homer and extending ever more widely to the present day; that its purposes, like those of many other forms of omen, are both corroborative and prophetic; that many of its phenomena may be most easily explained by assuming the temporary presence in the sneezer of a divine power as the agent of the sneeze,⁴ whose very presence makes the sneeze, his form of revelation, itself divine; that other cases appear to be drawn from the rather distinct side of therapeutic practice; and, finally, that these notions probably became, in their interpretation, confused, not only with each other, but also with other fundamental conceptions, such as those of beginnings and of right and left.

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¹ See the index by Bonitz, *s.vv.* *πταλπειν, πταπυός*.

² P. 435, notes 8, 9, *supra*.

³ Certain additional references to sneezing in ancient usage not cited in the pages above are these: Schol. ad Pind. *Ol.* 12. 10; Ar. *Aves* 721 ff.; Dio Chrysost. *Orat.* 33 (vol. II, 19. 5 Dind.); Sen. *De Ira*, ii. 25. 3; Pliny *N.H.* xix. 39; xxviii. 26 (for a custom at banquets). For some additional modern references see the following: Wüttke *op. cit.* 378, 770; Drechsler *op. cit.* II, 268; R. C. Temple in *Folk-Lore* X (1899), 435; *Folk-Lore* XV (1904), 94.

⁴ Cf. F. W. H. Myers, "Greek Oracles" (in his *Classical Essays* 77), who does not, however, treat the subject in detail or attempt any proof of the demonic theory as applied to sneezing.